

← Back to Original Article

Steve Roden: Breaking the rules of art

A tension between architecture and "wonk," rigidity and experimentation, is a defining feature of his oeuvre, which spans multiple mediums. He has shows coming up in Pasadena and Pomona.

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Winding through a studio filled with collections of curious objects — midcentury ceramics, vintage design magazines, Victorian-era photographs — Steve Roden pauses before a small, rather plain architectural drawing: his most prized possession, he says, by a man he considers "probably the largest influence on me of any artist," modernist architect Rudolf Schindler.

It is a surprising statement from an artist who, though deeply indebted to modernism philosophically, would seem to share none of its fastidious aesthetic, nor architecture's tendency toward stable, monumental forms. But then Schindler was not, perhaps, your classic modernist, and when Roden speaks of him — comparing him, initially, with his peer Richard Neutra — the affinity is clear. Indeed, he might as well be talking about himself.

With Neutra, he says, "there's a crispness to everything. It's like theater, in a way. With Schindler, there's wonk. There's tactility. There are things that don't work. There's a strange use of color at times. I don't think he was ever struggling toward a signature. Architecture seems like such a rigid job, and yet he would literally change plans in construction. There's something I find unremarkable about the work — in a positive way. It's never trying to show off, and it exploits the formal qualities of the medium to such an interesting degree."

One might say the same of Roden's work, though he would likely shy from the comparison. This tension between architecture and "wonk," rigidity and experimentation, is a defining feature of his broad and rigorous *oeuvre*, which spans painting, drawing, sculpture, film and sound art. Building on artists such as John Cage and Sol Lewitt, he works from predetermined systems that generally involve the translation of information from a source material into another medium: translating the notes of a musical score into colors and patterns for a painting, for instance, or using the visual dynamics of a painting as a score for generating sound.

The systems are cannily derived and sometimes bafflingly complex, but the effect is far from dry. Intuition enters in, as well as subjective aesthetic judgments. Rules are broken, mistakes are made and embraced. Roden's surfaces, whether physical or sonic, are engagingly tactile. His sound works are quiet and intimate investigations of the textures and dimensions of sound, typically undertaken with minimal technology (he doesn't read music or play an instrument). His paintings — all abstract — flirt with architectural structure, but with a handmade character that leaves them feeling wobbly, dynamic and exuberant.

"I want to have these pieces formed from three different things: my own intuition, the information and the thing that's being made," he says. "So all three of us are kind of conversing at the same time. My voice is clearly present, but the other two things have a voice as well."

With a 20-year survey opening at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena on Sept. 12 and a major installation — his largest to date — up simultaneously at Pomona College, it is a season of unusual visibility for Roden, an artist who's maintained a relatively low profile over the years, highly respected by peers and critics but conspicuously underrepresented in some of the glossier regions of the art world. The roots of this disparity lie partly in the work, which is thoughtful and understated — not the sort to make a spectacle of itself at an art fair — and partly in the 46-year-old artist's reserved nature. Speaking in his Pasadena studio adjacent to the home he shares with his wife, Sari, he is modest yet voluble, conversant with art world histories and hierarchies but fervent in his protection of "the making," as his puts it, and quietly insistent on setting his own terms.

The Armory show, organized by former LACMA curator Howard Fox, offers a balanced, if abbreviated survey of Roden's multifaceted practice over the last two decades, with an insightful (and affectionate) catalog essay by Fox. The Pomona show counters this backward glance with two new bodies of work: a massive architectural installation made from wood, string, hand-drawn film projections and sound elements, based on a notational drawing of Buckminster Fuller's from the 1960s; and a series of paintings derived from a collection of postcards once belonging to the late painter Frederick Hammersley, whom Roden has long admired.

Roden was born and raised in the L.A. area — his father lived in a Schindler house when he was growing up — and he attended the then-Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design, and then Art Center College of Design in Pasadena for his MFA, where he made what he describes as intuitive, biomorphic abstractions in the vein of Brice Marden and Terry Winters. A conceptually oriented school in the throes of high theory in the late 1980s, the Art Center was a challenging environment for such a painter, and Roden recounts having a tough go of it.

"I was so averse to doing anything conceptual," he says. "I found this article by Agnes Martin where she talked about emptying your head of all intellectual thought and I was like, 'That is where I want to be.' I still always talk about that. I want to be in that place where the monk has to continue to sweep the steps before he gets to go to the next place."

It was only after graduate school, as he began to explore Cage's work more deeply, that he hit upon the notion of systematic processes and made what he now calls "the first painting."

"It was all black and there was some sort of intuitive mushy stuff going on in the background and I was totally frustrated," he recounts. "I remember this day so well." He picked up an art magazine and decided to copy the first letter in every ad for a solo show onto the surface of the canvas. It was the first time I was willing to accept something predetermined and force myself to be very comfortable with the results. It didn't look anything like what I wanted to make — I think that was what was so exciting about it."

He worked with text in this way for the next seven or eight years, drawing primarily on works of late 19th century and early 20th century European literature — taking the first letter on every page of a Hermann Hesse novel, say — until gradually growing dissatisfied again. He was working with writers who confronted "gigantic ideas," he felt, while he himself "was just stealing things from the surface."

At one point, instead of copying letters, he labeled 26 different pencils with the 26 letters of the alphabet, then began to work through the Hesse text again, making a mark for each letter with the designated pencil. It was slow going, but he began to feel he was learning something.

"Instead of taking something and recontextualizing it," he says, "I was going back to the thing and engaging it physically, using it to suggest physical actions. It wasn't just cutting something apart and putting it back together, it became a score. So the conversation became much deeper."

Roden works in series, each a little different in its parameters, each building on the lessons of the previous. These winding paths of formal interrogation, the humble discoveries and minor revelations are what lend the work its inquisitive and genuinely (as opposed to rhetorically) experimental character. There is a danger, however, in reading too much into them. As Fox writes in the survey's catalog: "The system, like a riddle which is intended not to be solved, is not meant as a coercive encrypting device but rather as a starting point for all manner of artistic improvisation... [T]he methodology is intended as a tool for the artist, not as a 'clue' or signifier of privy information for the viewer."

It is a distinction that's often been overlooked in critical writing on Roden's work. Indeed, it's striking how rarely reviews have paused to acknowledge how wonderfully engaging the works are as objects: lively and strange, precarious and bold, full of energy and rich deliberation.

Roden has gotten used to this response. "The process seems to be the easiest and clearest way for people to write about the work," he acknowledges. "I'm OK with it on one hand, but it does paint me as a kind of tinkerer, savant or mystic, none of which I'm comfortable with."

The objects, he maintains, "are super important to me. Certainly, my process reeks a bit of the kind of conceptual art that has historically rendered the resulting object as secondary to the activity that birthed it. But the things I make, they need to be seen (or heard) and they need to have their own voice, and you should want to converse with them outside of my own concerns. It's the most important thing. And yes, almost no one ever mentions it except other artists."

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